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Building Bridges Across A Deep Divide

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- Hamas' Military Operations: Resistance or Terrorism?
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HAMAS' MILITARY OPERATIONS: RESISTANCE OR TERRORISM?

Khaled al-Hroub

The Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, incorporated the military option into its strategic policy in 1991. With the steady rise in Israeli crackdowns, armed conflict became a focal point. Hamas' military wing, the Izzeddin al-Qassam, carried out attacks on Israeli military options, while younger, less organized Hamas sympathizers embarked on the much publicized attacks on buses. Adopting a military recourse gained Hamas a greater popular following on one hand, and garnered the movement's political legitimacy among Palestinians on the other. In addition, Hamas' strengthened position placed it on par with the new Palestinian Authority, established in the Gaza Strip and Jericho during 1994.

Hamas took up the banner it felt the PLO had abandoned, i.e., armed struggle against Israeli occupation. Hamas' charter states: "No solution is possible for the Palestinian question except through jihad. As for peace initiatives and international conferences, they are merely a waste of time.... When the enemy usurps a part of the Muslims' land, then jihad becomes an individual obligation, and, as such, hoisting the banner of jihad is a must in confronting the Israeli usurpation of Palestine." ¹

Hamas views political activity as complementary to the military option. Hamas defines the relationship between military action and political activities indirectly: "Political activities, as we conceive them, are one aspect of jihad against the Zionist enemy; and they help strengthen our people's jihad and perseverance in confronting the Zionist occupation, mobilizing the potentials of our people and Ummah to support our

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cause."² Thus military struggle is "a firmly established strategy, while the tools and timing are variables" to Hamas.³

Hamas is not the only Islamic movement to have adopted armed resistance. Prior to Hamas' inception in 1987, various Islamic groups with some connection to the Muslim Brotherhood were formed. In addition, Fathi Shiqaqi and Abdelaziz Audeh formed the Islamic Jihad in 1980. The military Brotherhood activists kept a low profile between 1984 and 1987 to avoid associating themselves with the movement's main body. The move helped avoid endangering the movement's public care institutions. Yet when the *intifada* (uprising) broke out in December 1987, activists took the lead.

Both secular and Islamist activists discouraged the use of arms during the *intifada*'s first three years, opting instead for demonstrations, stone throwing, and burning tires. These tactical methods proved successful, encouraging Palestinians to challenge the Israelis in droves. Yet as the *intifada* began to wane, other groups and organizations escalated their military operations, including Hamas.⁵

The Qassam Battalions were fully operational by 1992. They carried out a series of military campaigns, including the kidnapping and execution of an Israeli border guard, Nasim Tolidano in December 1992. Their military activities intensified throughout 1993 and 1994. Qassam operatives carried out numerous suicide attacks within Israeli boundaries. Targets included transportation vehicles for Israeli soldiers and settlers. Piercing attacks followed the February 1994 murder of over twenty worshippers in the al-Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron. After a hull in such campaigns, suicide operations resumed in early 1996 as a result of severe Palestinian Authority and Israeli crackdowns on Islamic groups.

The harsh measures the Palestinian Authority undertook against Hamas bore ominous signs of internecine conflict. After ratifying the Oslo Agreement in October 1993, and the subsequent establishment of the Palestinian Authority, Hamas faced a crisis. The Oslo Agreement commits the Palestinian Authority to prevent any attacks or military operations against Israeli targets launched from territories under its control. Since the brunt of Qassam action stems from Gaza, the relationship between Hamas and the PLO became heavily strained. Hamas was confronted with two difficult choices: either continue military operations against Israeli targets and risk bloody clashes with the Palestinian Authority, or freeze armed activity and avoid a civil war—at the expense of its hard-won respect and political legitimacy among Palestinians.

The movement also faced challenges caused by condemnation on the international front. Most of Hamas' military operations were labeled acts of terrorism, particularly by the American government. This adversely affected Hamas in the region. Some countries shied away from Hamas to

avoid American condemnation. Others condemned Hamas activities unequivocally. 6

Hamas Military Policies

Hamas' numerous public declarations, in addition to the leaderships' statements, shed light on the movement's military goals. For example, the movement limits military action to the Occupied Territories, and has pledged not to hit Israeli targets abroad. The move is a strategic attempt to avoid the PLO's previous experience, as well as to minimize labels of terrorism.

Despite the publicity created by recent suicide bombings on public Israeli buses, Hamas had long held a commitment to direct military operations only against legitimate military targets, not civilians.⁷ Attacks on civilian targets are recent manifestations of the group's military outlook. According to Hamas, such attacks are merely retribution for an increasing number of civilian deaths among Palestinians at Israeli hands.⁸ Hamas then proposed a truce with Israel where both sides would agree to avoid targeting civilians.⁹ Moreover, Hamas has issued communiqués regretting the loss of civilian life.¹⁰ Nevertheless, Hamas considers settlers in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip legitimate military targets, thus making their proposal untenable to the Israelis.

Hamas' recent targeting of civilians is a significant departure from its soldiers-only policy—a policy that had proven successful. For example, Shlomo Gazit, former head of Israeli military intelligence, stated:

We have recently faced operations that translate [Hamas'] policy regarding limiting their operations to soldiers and security personnel. This change in direction can lead to two things. First, it deprives us from the moral justification that the violence [against] Palestinians, which targets innocent civilians, children, women, and old people, is inhuman. On the international media level, no one can deny the right of people suffering from military occupation for forty-five years to revolt against and fight the occupying soldiers. Second, the success of the military operations is dealing a severe blow to Israeli army's pride, its invincible image, and its deterrent might. If these operations continue, no doubt they will increase the courage and daring of violent groups; and they may also motivate other Palestinian youths to join the ranks of these groups.11

Although Hamas drew international condemnation for its attacks on Israeli buses, the group shored up their popularity among Palestinians as each attack followed Israeli killings of their countrymen. For example, Hamas carried out a military operation after a massacre in Qara springs where Israelis killed approximately twenty Palestinians. Recently, the series of explosions that followed Palestinian elections were in retaliation to Israel's execution of Yahya Ayyash, the Qassam Battalion's functional head. In this manner, Hamas benefited from an atmosphere of popular bitterness over continued Israeli aggression despite the peace accords. A further boon to Hamas' position in Palestinian eyes is the group's demand that political prisoners be released. Nevertheless, Hamas' continued action against Israel placed it in direct conflict with the Palestinian Authority's interests.

As Hamas relationships with the Palestinian Authority deteriorated, particularly during 1995, signs of an imminent civil war became more apparent. Moreover, as Israel closed off its borders for lengthy periods, the Palestinian economy was hit hard as many laborers were cut off from their jobs. Palestinians began to question the wisdom of escalating military activities. As a result, Hamas has suspended military activities in the areas under the Palestinian Authority's jurisdiction; and the group is reevaluating its overall military strategy.¹³

Hamas continues to defend its right to military resistance. The group has also contacted officials in the United States explaining its position. Thus, the movement is keeping its options open. As a result of pressure within, as well as international condemnation, Hamas may well halt all its military activities. Yet Hamas must still contend with the possibility of losing popular support, due primarily to Israel's harsh collective punishment measures. Israel has been unable to incapacitate Hamas by attacking the group directly; yet it has been able to indirectly hurt the movement by crippling the economy. Hamas has survived repeated Israeli crackdowns in the past; its current crisis may be the most challenging yet.

¹ Charter of the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) of Palestine, 1988, 15-16.

² Identification Memo, printed in December 1993.

³ Filistin al-Muslimah, interview with Musa Abu Marzuq, June 1994.

⁴ Yousef, Ahmed. Hamas: Passing Phase or Permanent Option? [Arabic] Chicago: International Center for Studies and Research, 1990.

⁵ Prior to the *intifada*, military operations were carried out under different names such as "Palestine Mujahidin." Sometimes no one claimed responsibility. See Ghassan Do'ar in Filistin al-Muslimah, 1993. These operations deviated from the

intifada's unarmed resistance methods, and were insignificant. However, two such operations were effective in challenging the Israeli security forces: the kidnapping of Afi Sasioritz, an Israeli soldier, in February 1989 and the kidnapping of another soldier, Ilan Sa'done, three months later. Hamas claimed responsibility for both operations and executed both soldiers.

- ⁶ Overt as well as ambiguous condemnation of Hamas' military operations by Arab and Islamic countries gradually escalated. Since late 1994, the words of condemnation grew in severity until reaching a climax in January 1996 following a series of Hamas bus bombings. Most Middle Eastern nations, with the exception of Syria, Lebanon, and Iran, condemned the operations to varying degrees.
- $^7\,$ As an example, review the military declaration issued by Hamas' Political Bureau in April 1994.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Communique entitled "Military Declaration Issued by the Martyr Izzeddin al-Qassam Battalions / Palestinian Civilian Defense Unit, 17 May 1994.
- D Hamas Political Bureau Communique, 12 March 1996.
- Yedi'ot Ahranot, 12 August 1993.
- ² As an example, review Sufyan Abu Zayid's statement, one of Fatah's prominent figures in the Gaza Strip, to Israeli Radio on 12 September 1994, commenting on Hamas' kidnap of an Israeli soldier: "The Palestinian street is supporting the kidnappers' demands; the release of the 5,000 prisoners."
- ^B A collection of announcements by prominent figures in Hamas lead to this trend, the last of which was made by Ghazi Hamad in Gaza after the Palestinian elections: "The majority in Hamas support the temporary cessation of military operations." *Al-Hayah*, 31 January 1996.

Riding the Storm: Hamas' Bid to Lead the Palestinian People

Dr. Ali Jarbawi

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AHMED YASSIN: A LEADER IN LIMBO

Ahmad Rashad

While some embrace it, others begrudgingly accept it; and still others vehemently oppose it. Yet to all, Sheikh Ahmed Yassin embodies the loose ends—those elements that the peace accord ignored or dealt with iniquitously. He is a refugee and a jailed ideologue. His agenda is that of Islamic socioeconomic development. He has preached the sanctity of Jerusalem. Israeli settlements are a constant part of his discourse. And he is paralyzed in all but speech and sight. Thus, irrespective of his religious views, Yassin strikes an emotive chord among Palestinians.

Yassin, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, was a key player in the creation of Hamas, the Palestinian Islamic Resistance Movement. A moderate Islamist, he envisions the establishment of an independent Palestinian nation governed by an Islamic constitution. He is opposed to vilifying Judaism; yet he is also adamantly defiant of Israeli authority. While he does not rule out a truce with Israel, he does not recognize it as an independent nation. This contumacy ultimately led to his lengthy incarceration beginning in 1989. Although one of many political prisoners, Yassin's lifelong devotion to his beliefs, both social and political, has made his a household name among fellow countrymen.

The Early Years

Ahmed Yassin was born in 1938. His father died shortly thereafter. Following the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, his family joined thousands of

Ahmad Rashad, author of *Hamas: Palestinium Politics with an Islamic Hue*, is a Research Associate at the United Association for Studies and Research.

refugees in Gaza's camps. Yassin spent much of his early life amid the squalor of the Shati camp which lay on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

Both schools and educators were sparse during those years. Yassin was an exemplary pupil; and, as such, functioned as an assistant teacher as well as a student until completing high school in 1958. Relying on students for assistance was not uncommon; yet Yassin's contributions were remarkable considering his faltering health.

During the summer of 1952, Yassin suffered a near fatal accident that altered his life. He and his classmates used to dive into the ocean from elevated rocks. On one such occasion, Yassin dove into a shallow part of the sea, receiving severe damage to the spinal column which resulted in partial paralysis. The condition continued to worsen until he eventually became quadriplegic. Once a fun-loving extrovert, Yassin focused his attentions completely on his education and religious studies.

Yassin could not attend university due to a lack of funds and his bad health. Instead, he decided to become a teacher. Partisan politics kept him out of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency's schools. Nationalists administered UNRWA's educational facilities; and Yassin's religious leanings were not welcome. The only alternative was a government school.² The Egyptian authorities may well have rejected Yassin's application; yet the Education Administrator's son was an invalid. He admired Yassin for pursuing a career despite his disabilities and granted his petition.

Yassin married during the early 1960s. His first two children died, but the couple eventually bore several boys and girls. Having established both a career and a family, Yassin gave more attention to local community needs. Israel's occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in 1967 not only reinforced his social commitment, it drove him further into the realm of politics.

The Roots of Revolution

Yassin did not, at first, advocate a revolution against Israeli occupation. In line with his affiliation to the Muslim Brotherhood, he initially sought the economic and moral reformation of society. His involvement with the Brethren began during his childhood.

The Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamic reform movement established in Egypt during 1928, set up a Palestinian chapter in Jerusalem on October 26, 1945.³ Following its inception, the group adhered rigorously to its main goal of advancing Islamic social responsibility and self-reliance. The Brotherhood spent most of its resources on charities, youth clubs, and Islamic schools. As a child, Yassin was among those who took advantage of the Brethren's activities. As an adult, he expanded them.

Yassin was an integral part of consolidating the Brotherhood's oper-

ations. The movement was highly decentralized during the 1950s and 1960s since Jordan administered the West Bank and Egypt was in control of the Gaza Strip. This changed, however, after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Since Israel now controlled all the territories, the Palestinian Brethren and their Jordanian counterparts actioned an organizational restructuring that made Jordan the policy-making center of both groups during the 1970s. In order to manage the Palestinian Brotherhood's daily activities, however, Yassin established *al-Mujamma' al-Islami* (the Islamic Center) in Gaza. He served as its secretary-general until 1984. The Center eventually coordinated the activities of all organizations administered by the local Brotherhood.

Yassin worked hard to solidify the network's social base. Although his activities were initially limited to Gaza, he became known throughout the territories. Yassin visited most mosques on a regular basis, giving lectures and collecting donations for the needy. He also established the groundwork for educational facilities within the mosque network, catering to men, women and children.

Yassin's teaching responsibilities limited his ability to achieve his goals. So his forced retirement by the Israeli authorities in the early 1980s came at an opportune moment. Capitalizing on the extra time, Yassin expanded his activities. He began visiting politically active Palestinians within the 1948 borders in Israel.⁶ He also established a scholarship program, sending numerous students to universities abroad. They returned as doctors, lawyers and engineers, and made significant gains in their respective unions.

Overall, however, many Palestinians remained uncertain of the Brotherhood. On the one hand, it provided much needed social welfare programs, distributed *zakat* (alms) donations, contributed to the administration of *awqaf* (religious endowments), ran youth clubs, sponsored schools, and provided community health care. Yet, on the other, it did not participate in the armed struggle against Israel, which peaked in the early 1970s; it clashed with the nationalists; and the Israelis, for the most part, did not interfere with their work. Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) loyalists insisted that the Brotherhood was cooperating with the "Zionist entity." In fact, the movement lost quite a few members to Fateh, the PLO's most powerful faction, during the 1960s and early 1970s due to its perceived pacifism.⁷

Although the Brotherhood's policy of patience and limited involvement in politics had served its purpose, Yassin and his colleagues realized that active political involvement would soon be necessary (although the group's leadership had not planned on it coming as soon as December 1987 when the *intifada*, or uprising, broke out). The group's leadership began priming a political wing, albeit a vague one, for some

time prior to the uprising.

Yassin's contributions, however, were limited. On July 15, 1984, he was arrested on charges of sedition and sentenced to 13 years in prison. Having served almost eleven months of his term, Yassin was released in a prisoner exchange program on May 20, 1985. Undeterred by the experience, the quadriplegic sheikh convened a number of meetings with Brethren leaders; and they decided during 1985/86 to implement a policy of resistance via civil disturbance. The Brotherhood began issuing leaflets to this effect under several names, such as *Harakat al-Kifah al-Musallah* (Armed Struggle Movement), *al-Murabitoon 'ala Ard al-Isra'* (The Steadfast on the Land of al-Isra'), and *Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya* (Islamic Resistance Movement, IRM).⁸

The communiqués were concerned primarily with corruption and immorality; but they became more politicized as tensions escalated in the territories. The IRM distributed leaflets during 1987 warning Palestinians against the tactics employed by the Shin Bet, Israel's secret service, of using intimidation, drugs, blackmail, and sexual coercion to induce young Palestinians to collaborate against activists. The Islamists refrained from organizing confrontations with Israeli soldiers; yet the advent of the December 1987 uprising changed the status quo.

Hamas

The Islamic Resistance Movement issued three communiqués during the first weeks of the uprising: the first on December 14 calling for an escalation of resistance; the second in the final week of that month calling for the same, as well as chastising Arab governments for their silence; and the third (the first time the movement referred to events as *al-Intifada al-Mubaraka* (the Blessed Uprising)) recounting Israeli atrocities and praising the popular unrest. ¹⁰ These were the first such documents pressing the population to confront the Israelis.

As grass-roots activists organized demonstrations, seven leading members of the Brotherhood began developing a strategy for dealing with the situation. These were Sheikh Ahmed Yassin, Dr. 'Abdel Aziz Rantisi, Dr. Ibrahim al-Yazuri, Sheikh Salih Shihada, 'Isa al-Nashar, Muhammad Shama'a, and 'Abd al-Fattah Dukhan.¹¹ They opted for a separate political wing—Hamas—loosely connected with the Muslim Brotherhood. "Hamas" began appearing on IRM communiqués in January 1988. On February 11, a leaflet was issued identifying Hamas as the Brethren's arm of strength (al-saa'id al-qawiy). This was the first public statement of affiliation with the mother organization.

Declaring the link was imperative for the Brotherhood to restore its image before a public that had questioned the movement's commitment to liberating Palestine. Ali al-Jarbawi, a prominent political scientist at

Bir Zeit University, writes: "Establishing Hamas as a movement resisting occupation, and involving its adherents in the *intifada*'s civil disturbances clearly and effectively, was the most important step taken by the Muslim Brotherhood movement in its drive to achieve political legitimacy within Palestinian society." ¹²

The Brotherhood's strategy was to create a decentralized yet hierarchical system of operations. ¹³ Hamas is composed of administrative, charitable, political, and military elements, all of which have subdivisions. The administrative wing coordinates the movement's actions. Charity work is conducted in cooperation with other Islamic centers sympathetic to Hamas. The political activity that takes place within the territories is confined to Hamas sympathizers participating in union and university elections. Externally, Hamas has information and political offices in a number of neighboring states. The "military" wing, known as the Izzedin Qassam Brigades, is responsible for combating the occupation.

Hamas established cells and command centers regionally; but they are bound by the orders of a secretive, central authority. According to Boaz Ganor, an Israeli intelligence analyst,

Hamas...is run along hierarchical regional lines: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are divided into a number of sectors, each sector comprising a number of secondary regions. The movement's various sections, it seems, maintain representatives on the regional level as well (in the secondary regions). These representatives report to regional and sector supervisors, the latter of whom are directly responsible to the heads of their sections. ¹⁴

Yassin, in consultation with the six other founding members, managed the complexities of administering Hamas' affairs. Prior to his 1989 arrest, Yassin was al-Mas'ul al-'Am (Director-General) of the movement. He "assigned Shaykh Jamil Hamami, a Brotherhood activist in the West Bank...to establish with his colleagues a branch for Hamas there. Hamami thus became the liaison between the leadership in Gaza on the one hand and the Hamas command in the West Bank and the Brotherhood command in Jordan on the other." 15

Given that all the founders were Brethren, Hamas' structure borrows heavily from the movement. For example, each region is comprised of "families" and branches, answerable to an administrative center. Hamas members, however, are not singular in perspective. There are four general categories in which they fall—intelligentsia, sheikhs (religious leaders), professionals, and activists. Contrary to media reports identifying zealots from poverty-stricken areas that lead the movement,

"among [its leaders] are intellectuals, bourgeoisie and educated people far from the bottom rungs of the social ladder." ¹⁶

At the *intifada*'s outset, the *sheikhs* were in charge of directing Hamas and formulating its policy, which accounts for the fiery statements and documents inundated with religious references (this is most evident in Hamas' charter in which virtually every paragraph ends with a Qur'anic verse). As the uprising progressed, however, and the organization accrued experience and maturity, the intellectuals held greater sway with the blessings of Yassin and other leaders.

In identifying the various phases of Hamas' development, Jean-François Legrain notes: "Whereas the Islamic Resistance Movement displays great ideological continuity, several periods can be distinguished, corresponding to clearly differentiated political practices, and leading to serious questions as to whether the authors of its very first tracts were the same as those of its later ones." Since Hamas leaders were developing a political rather than social movement, they opened the door for non-Brotherhood Islamists to enter the movement. Although Yassin was a key player in forming strategic decisions, his role increasingly became that of a spiritual advisor, particularly following his 1989 incarceration.

Yassin was among the first leading moderates in Hamas jailed by Israel; but not the last. Israel's arm has also reached across the Atlantic, encouraging America's incarceration of Musa Abu Marzuq, chief of Hamas' political wing and a key component of the movement's pragmatic elements. Although Israel assumed such moves would hamper, or possibly end, Hamas activities, the opposite has occurred. Israel has altered the political rather than military direction Hamas was moving in. Previously, leaders such as Yassin and Marzuq held some sway over the group's highly unregimented military arm, the Izzedin Qassam Brigades.

The Qassam Brigades are divided into independent cells of five to ten combatants. The total number of hard core fighters is estimated at around 100, although many more sympathizers claim to be part of these cells. Following repeated Israeli crackdowns, these cells distanced themselves from the political leadership. They give Hamas their allegiance and are bound to its general long-term goals; yet do not report their plans or activities to the political hierarchy, thus avoiding detection by Israeli and Palestinian Authority security services.

While Yassin and Abu Marzuq were free, the military cells honored their calls for limited armed activity. Upon their incarceration, however, Hamas lost a vital component of its leadership, creating a void filled by more militant cadres. Yasser Arafat has paid little attention to Yassin's imprisonment, "insisting that [Yassin] be released very soon." Arafat must make such statements to placate the Palestinian people, as they feel he has abandoned the political prisoners held by Israel. Other than

rhetoric, however, he has made no substantive moves to pressure Israel on releasing such captives.

With hard-liners in the political wing taking over the reigns, activists in the field have been emboldened to step up their activities confident that they will not alienate the hierarchy. The result: more violent campaigns extending to both civilian and military targets, like those carried out several months ago. Such attacks were previously frowned upon by Yassin and his peers.

Pragmatism is the order of the day to such leaders. Yassin, Marzuq and other moderates were pushing for Hamas' participation in Palestinian elections; yet their voices were drowned out by the sharp rise in manhunts carried out both by Israeli and Yasser Arafat's security forces. As a result, Yassin has stated that as long as the Palestinian Authority continues its policy of appeasement vis-à-vis Israel, the Islamists will not participate in elections.¹⁹

Israel and Arafat's two-pronged approach—jail moderates and hunt down militants—are an explosive combination. Moderates are not only losing ground, but also re-thinking their positions. Radicals are taking more desperate, and violent, measures. If moderate leaders in the Islamic movement, no matter how bitter a pill their ideals are to swallow, are not able to take control of their movement's reigns, far less experienced, and more militant, charioteers will take over.

¹ Yousef, Ahmed, and Muhammed Ahmed Abu Eissa. *Sheikh al-Intifadah: Ahmed Yassin*. Dubai, UAE: Al Ummah Publishing and Distribution House, 1991, 22. The youth in refugee camps typically took several years longer than usual to complete their education due to school closures. The 1948 diaspora also contributed to the delayed graduation of a generation.

 $^{^2}$ At this time, Egypt administered the Gaza Strip, including health and education.

³ Mayer, Thomas. "The Military Force of Islam: The Society of the Muslim Brethren and the Palestine Question, 1945-48." In *Zionism and Arabism in Palestine and Israel*, edited by Elie Kedourie and S. Haim. New York: Frank Cass, 1982, 103. ⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Abu-Amr, Ziad. "Hamas: A Historical and Political Background." Journal of Palestine Studies, vol. 22, no. 4 (Summer 1993): 7.

⁶ Yassin's frequent visits to Abdullah Darwish, a communist, had a profound effect. Darwish eventually embraced the Brotherhood's ideals and went on to establish a chapter within Israel.

⁷ Bin Yousef, Ahmed. *Hamas: Khalfiyat al-Nash'a wa Aafaq al-Maseer*. Worth, IL: International Center for Research and Studies, 1989, 8.